

# Fulbright Is Building His Tonkin Case

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 6.—The Senate Foreign Relations Committee feels it is building a case indicating that the Administration reacted to the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incidents too hastily and without conclusive proof that American destroyers had come under attack.

The informal inquiry into the Tonkin incidents, according to committee sources, has turned up no evidence suggesting that two United States destroyers actually did not come under attack by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in early August, 1964. But in the opinion of committee sources, the inquiry is raising serious questions about the decision-making process followed by the Administration in first analyzing and then in forcefully reacting to the attacks.

The basic question emerging from the inquiry is whether the Administration had clear-cut proof of the second attack before it ordered the bombing of naval bases and oil depots in North Vietnam and sought a Congressional resolution to support its actions.

## Turning Point in Vietnam

The Gulf of Tonkin incidents provided a turning point in the United States involvement in Vietnam. The first attack, about which there is no controversy, took place on the destroyer Maddox on Aug. 2, 1964. The second attack, which is becoming the focal point in the developing controversy between the Senate committee and the Administration, took place on the night of Aug. 4 against the destroyers Maddox and Turner Joy.

In recent weeks, since the committee began its inquiry, the Defense Department has asserted repeatedly that there was "conclusive" evidence of the second attack. The committee is not seriously challenging this assertion.

But the question it is raising is whether the "conclusive" evidence of the second attack was available to the Administration when it decided upon its military reaction.

Within 11 hours after the second attack, United States planes were striking at targets in North Vietnam, and the next day the Administration asked Congress for a resolution approving "all necessary measures" taken by the President "to prevent further aggression" in Southeast Asia.

## Announced by Fulbright

Senator J.W. Fulbright, Democrat of Arkansas, the committee chairman, announced last month that the committee was conducting an inquiry "to clear up uncertainties" about the Gulf of Tonkin incidents. Since then, the committee has received what were described by committee sources as "interesting leads."

The information, some supplied anonymously by individuals apparently still in Government service, was reported to have come from about half a dozen persons, some of them former naval officers, others civilian Government employees who were apparently involved in the gathering of information on the incidents.

The pattern of the information, according to committee sources, is that the evidence available to the Administration about the second attack was too sketchy and contradictory to warrant the immediate response of ordering the bombing of North Vietnamese targets and seeking a Congressional resolution. Thus, one of the informants reported that while the first reports of an attack from the destroyers were definite, they tended to become more vague and confused as the four-hour incident continued.

## Shift in the Thrust

The new information obtained by the committee has resulted in a significant shift in the thrust of the inquiry. Initially the inquiry was undertaken as a result of suspicions over whether the second attack ever took place.

Gradually, particularly after receiving still secret information provided by the Defense Department, the committee staff has come to the conclusion that the Pentagon's evidence of the second attack probably can not be challenged. Now, therefore, the inquiry is turning



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more in the direction of a critical examination of the Government's command-and-control and decision-making procedures in the second incident.

Did these procedures, designed to avoid too precipitate an action in the nuclear age, somehow break down in the second incident? Was contradictory information interpreted in the light of an initial conclusion that an attack was taking place or in the light of a growing belief within the Administration that the time had come to carry the war to North Vietnam?

Were events set in motion

that influenced the Administration's decision, such as alert orders to the carriers for a strike and to the television networks for a Presidential announcement? These are among the questions now being raised in the inquiry.

## Largely One-Man Show

Whether the inquiry will go beyond a staff study into a full-scale committee investigation remains undetermined. Thus far, it has been largely a one-man show by Senator Fulbright.

When Congress reconvenes next week, the expectation is that Senator Fulbright will officially inform the full committee about the result of the inquiry thus far. Then the full committee will have to decide whether to move into executive hearings with testimony from Government officials and some of the informants who have offered to testify.

Senator Fulbright still has the initiative within the committee, but he is moving cautiously. He does not want to place himself or his committee into a position of launching an investigation that seems to impugn the integrity of the Administration.

At the same time, to Senator Fulbright and other committee members, the Gulf of Tonkin incidents seem to point up the problem of how decisions are made in a nuclear age. And it is precisely this problem which the committee has been exploring in its increasingly critical examination of the Executive Branch's exercise of its power over foreign policy.